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## ADDISON'S INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTEREST IN FOLK-POETRY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Addison's two essays on the ballad of "Chevy Chase" (*Spectator*, Nos. 70 and 74) and his essay on the "Two Children in the Wood" (*Spectator*, No. 85) are commonly cited as an instance of the ineptness of classical criticism in contact with romantic material; or, if they receive any credit at the hands of the modern historian of literature, it is confined to such acknowledgment as Mr. Beers concedes when he says: "But it was much that Addison, whose own verse was so artificial, should have had a taste for the wild graces of folk-song."<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, these essays played a considerable part in developing the vogue of ballad poetry, both on account of the great, if comparatively short-lived, reputation of their author as a literary critic, and on account of the fact that Addison gives expression in them to views distinctly antagonistic to the classical canon. As such, these essays deserve a more serious consideration than has ordinarily been allotted to them.

Of Addison's life-long interest in folk-poetry we have the critic's own evidence. During the continental tour which he made as a young man, "I took," he says, "a particular delight in hearing the songs and fables that are come from father to son, and are most in vogue among the common people of the countries through which I passed."<sup>2</sup> In an essay on the "Loquacity of the Fair Sex"<sup>3</sup> he quotes "that excellent old ballad of the Wanton Wife of Bath:

'I think, quoth Thomas, women's tongues  
Of aspen leaves are made.'

Addison's opera *Rosamond*, if we are to believe the somewhat dubious theory which the anonymous editor of the *Old Ballads of 1723*

<sup>1</sup> *History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 285.

<sup>2</sup> *Spectator*, No. 70. Steele also confesses to a keen interest in ballads. See *Spectator*, No. 454, where Steele says that his "unhappy curiosity is such" that he has to take a coach to avoid the temptation to loiter with the ballad-singers. See also *Spectator*, No. 502.

<sup>3</sup> *Spectator*, No. 247.

expresses in the Preface to that work, is founded on the ballads which clustered around King Henry's fated mistress. It is, however, to the two *Spectator* essays on "Chevy Chase" and the essay on "The Children in the Wood" that Addison's special significance in ballad-criticism attaches itself.

The idea of writing the two essays on "Chevy Chase" may have been suggested to Addison by the inclusion of "The Ancient and Most Famous Ballad of Chevy Chase, With the Translation of it into Latin by the Command of the Bishop of London," in the third edition of Dryden's *Second Miscellany* (1702).<sup>1</sup> But even without this immediate suggestion, and the popularity of this ballad as indicated by its inclusion in such respectable company, Addison had the best possible authority for a serious treatment of popular literature in general, and "Chevy Chase" in particular. Montaigne had given the French *cachet* to the study of popular poetry.

Popular and purely natural and indigenous poetry [he says<sup>2</sup>] has a certain native simplicity and grace, by which it may be favourably compared with the principal beauty of perfect poetry composed according to the rules of art; as may be seen in the Villanelles of Gascony, and in songs coming from nations that have no knowledge of any science, not even of writing.

In England, Sir William Temple,<sup>3</sup> despite the superciliousness of his general attitude toward folk-poetry, admitted that some of it wanted not the true spirit of poetry in some degree, or that natural inspiration which has been said to arise from some spark of poetical fire wherewith particular men are born; and such as it was, it served the turn, not only to please, but even to charm the ignorant and barbarous vulgar where it was in use.

Further English precedent may be cited in Addison's own words:

I have heard that the late Lord Dorset, who had the greatest wit tempered with the greatest candour, and was one of the finest critics, as

<sup>1</sup> In the *Muses' Mercury* for June, 1707 (pp. 127 ff.) occurs an essay "Of Old English Poets and Poetry," which serves to introduce a reprint of "The Nut Browne Maid." This essay, after enumerating and commenting on a number of specimens of English poetry, says: "Much about the time of Lidgate was the old poem of 'Chevy Chase' writ. The author of it is not known; but it was in great esteem in the three last centuries, even by men of the best sense." Here follows the usual quotation from Sir Philip Sidney.

As Steele was a contributor to the *Muses' Mercury*, it is possible that he may have been responsible for this essay, and that he may have suggested the subject of "Chevy Chase" to Addison as suitable for a *Spectator* paper—but this is mere conjecture.

<sup>2</sup> *Essays*, trans. Cotton, ed. W. C. Hazlitt, Vol. I, Essay No. 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Essay of Poetry* (1692).

well as the best poets, of his age, had a numerous collection of Old English Ballads, and took a particular pleasure in the reading of them. I can affirm the same of Mr. Dryden; and know several of the most refined writers of our present age who are of the same humour.<sup>1</sup>

There was moreover an especial propriety in the selection of "Chevy Chase" for critical discussion. Not only was it (the words are Addison's) "the favourite ballad of the people of England," but Ben Jonson used to say that he had rather have been the author of it than of all of his works.<sup>2</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Discourse of Poetry*, speaks of it in the following words, "I never heard the old song of Peirey and Douglas, that I found not my heart more moved than with a trumpet; and yet it is sung by some blind Crowder with no rougher voice than rude style; which being so evil appareled in the dust and cobweb of that uncivil age, what would it work trimmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar?"<sup>3</sup>

With such respectable warranty did Addison set about the critical examination of "Chevy Chase." His criticism involves two dissimilar modes of approach, or rather two not very well correlated critical premises. The first of these is that the ultimate test of poetry is simplicity and truth to nature, rather than conformity to the fashions of the day. The second is that a heroic poem (to which class he assumes "Chevy Chase" to belong) must conform to the "rules" "laid down" by "the greatest modern critics." The fact that, after making out a particularly good case for the first of these two propositions, he feels compelled to validate the ballad by finding a number of chance parallels between "Chevy Chase" and the *Aeneid*, is characteristic of the confusion which one finds in much of Addison's criticism. It is clear, indeed, that he feels this inconsistency himself; for he closes his second and last essay on "Chevy Chase" with the remark:

I shall only beg pardon for such a profusion of Latin quotations; which I should not have made use of, but that I feared my own judg-

<sup>1</sup> *Spectator*, No. 85.

<sup>2</sup> I have been unable to find any other evidence that Ben Jonson, Dorset, or Dryden manifested interest in ballads. The statement commonly made by historians of the eighteenth century (see Hamelius, *Die Kritik in der Eng. Lit. des 17. und 18. Jahrh.*, p. 101, and Beers, *Eighteenth Century Romanticism*, p. 283) that "Dryden included five ballads in the *Miscellanies*" is inaccurate. No ballads were included in the *Miscellanies* published during Dryden's lifetime. In the successive editions of the *Miscellanies* published after 1700, a number of ballads were included.

<sup>3</sup> *Spectator*, No. 70.

ment would have looked too singular on such a subject, had not I supported it by the practice and authority of Virgil.<sup>1</sup>

The latter of Addison's modes of criticism may be dismissed briefly.

The greatest modern critics [says Addison] have laid it down as a rule that an heroic poem should be founded upon some important precept of morality. . . . Homer and Virgil have formed their plans in this view.<sup>2</sup>

"Chevy Chase" was written to deter the barons from the feuds and petty quarrels to which they were prone. Hence the "precept" in the last stanza, which Addison quotes with approval:

God save the King and bless the land  
In plenty, joy and peace.  
And grant henceforth that foul debate  
'Twixt noblemen may cease.

Addison was familiar only with the contemporaneous broadside version of the ballad, and was of course unaware that the actual old ballad ends with nothing but the conventional ballad "tag":

Iesue Christ our balys bete,  
And to the blys us brynge!  
Thus was the hountynge of the Chivyat.  
God send us all good endyng!

in which there seems to be little effort to point a particular moral. But even in the enfeebled broadside version which Addison knew, there is enough of the old lust of combat still preserved to prevent even an eighteenth-century doctrinaire, one would think, from seeing in the last stanza anything more than an excrescence on the story.

Again, Addison finds the author of "Chevy Chase" conforming to the rules of epic poetry in choosing a hero from his own country and putting into his mouth heroic and passionate sentiments. The illustrations are obvious and need not detain us. Nor is it worth while to stop over Addison's citations of classical parallels to the poem, except to point out that in the only cases where they are particularly

<sup>1</sup> *Spectator*, No. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Le Bossu's *Traité du poème épique*, which Addison obviously has in mind, was translated into English in 1695 by "W. F.," and is much quoted by Dryden, Addison, and other critics. Pope prefixed a summary of the *Traité* to his translation of the *Odyssey*. The *Traité* constantly reiterates the prime importance of the moral in epic. "Homer had no other design than to form the manners of his countrymen," says Le Bossu ("W. F.'s" translation, 2d ed., London, 1719, II, 74).

apt, they have to do with passages in the broadside version, but not in the old ballad—such passages having come into being in the broadside through the fatal, but inevitable, process of trying to make the old story “literary.” For example, the lines:

The hounds ran swiftly through the woods  
The nimble deer to take,  
And with their cries the hills and dales  
An echo shrill did make.

Addison seizes upon—attracted by their literary flavor—and cites the parallel from Virgil:

Vocat ingenti clamore Cithaeron  
Taygetique canes, domitrixque Epidaurus equorum:  
Et vox assensu nemorum ingeminata remugit.

The same taste which foisted the passage upon the original made the reviewer find it attractive. It is criticism moving in a circle. In connection with this attitude, it is interesting to find Addison taking issue with Sidney for saying that the style of the ballad is rude. “The apparel [i. e., the diction] is much more gorgeous than many of the poets made use of in Queen Elisabeth’s time,” says our critic—a remark which ought to have suggested to him the idea that an older version may have existed.

The language Addison finds “majestic,” and the numbers “sonorous, sounding and poetical.” The country in which the scene is laid (the phrase is worth noting as coming in 1711) “has a fine romantic situation.” Finally, the mixture of intelligence and timorousness which is so characteristic of Addison comes out amusingly in his remarks on a stanza which he describes but refrains from quoting. The stanza is as follows:

For Witherington needs must I wayle  
As one in doleful dumps.  
For when his legs were smitten off  
He fought upon his stumps.

Says Addison,

In the catalogue of English who fell, Witherington’s behaviour is particularized very artfully, as the reader is prepared for it by the account which is given of him in the beginning of the ballad; though I am satisfied your little buffoon readers (who have seen that passage ridiculed in *Hudibras*) will not be able to take the beauty of it; for which reason I dare not so much as quote it.

A more spontaneous concession to the critical standards of his day is shown in the remark on Earl Percy's lamentation over his enemy. This lamentation "is serious, beautiful and passionate; I must only caution the reader not to let the simplicity of the style, which one may well pardon in so old a poet, prejudice him against the greatness of the thought." One wonders what an Augustan would have done with the bald simplicity and unadorned strength of the genuine old ballad.

The general scheme of criticism applied in the examination of "Chevy Chase" is followed also in the study of the "Two Children in the Wood."<sup>1</sup> To quote his comments and his classical citations would merely be to multiply examples. Suffice it to say that the quotation of classical parallels in a criticism of the "Two Children in the Wood" is even more patently absurd than in an examination of a poem having the heroic proportions of "Chevy Chase."

I have reserved for the end an examination of the most significant passage in these essays of Addison's—a passage in which he spoke better than he knew; and one which—if he had had the courage to live up to it—would have made him a unique figure in early eighteenth-century literary criticism.

It is impossible [he says, in opening the subject of the ballads] that anything should be universally tasted and approved by a multitude, though they are only the rabble of a nation, which hath not in it some peculiar aptness to please and gratify the mind of man. Human nature is the same in all reasonable creatures; and whatever falls in with it, will meet with admirers amongst readers of all qualities and conditions. Molière, as we are told by Monsieur Boileau, used to read all his comedies to an old woman who was his housekeeper, as she sat with him at her work by the chimney-corner, and could foretell the success of his play in the theatre from the reception it met with at his fireside; for he tells us the audience always followed the old woman, and never failed to laugh in the same place.

I know nothing which more shows the essential and inherent perfection of simplicity of thought, above that which I call the Gothic manner in writing, than this: the first pleases all kinds of palates, and the latter only such as have formed to themselves a wrong artificial taste upon little fanciful authors and writers of epigram. Homer, Virgil or Milton, so far as the language of their poems is understood, will please a reader of plain common sense, who would neither relish nor compre-

<sup>1</sup> Accessible to Addison in Chapbook of 1700.

hend an epigram of Martial or a poem of Cowley; so, on the contrary, an ordinary song or ballad that is the delight of the common people, cannot fail to reach all such readers as are not unqualified for the entertainment by their affectation or ignorance; and the reason is plain, because the same paintings of nature which recommend it to the most ordinary reader, will appear beautiful to the most refined.

It is not hard to find so-called sources for this pronouncement of Addison's. Longinus had said, "For when persons of different pursuits, habits of life, tastes, ages, principles, agree in the same joint approbation of any performance, then this union of assent stamps a high and indisputable value upon that performance."<sup>1</sup> Addison's phrase, "the rabble of a nation" sounds like an echo of the sixteenth-century Italian critic, Castelvetro, who believed that "poetry is intended not merely to please, but to please the populace, in fact everybody, even the vulgar mob."<sup>2</sup> The reference to Molière's old woman reminds us that the influence of that dramatist's appeal to the man of "everyday" common-sense, as against the *précieux*, is perceptible in many of Addison's *obiter dicta*.

Such historical parallels are not hard to find, but they do not impair the significance of this declaration when made in England in the year 1711. At a time when the poetic diction which we associate with Pope had become the supreme standard; at a time when poetry was being written very largely by cultivated Londoners for cultivated Londoners, it was certainly a matter of no slight import—this belief that the approval of "the rabble of a nation" constituted in itself one of the ultimate tests of good poetry.

If there were a lurking spirit of doubt in our minds as to the unconvictionality of such a theory in 1711, it would be dispelled by the ridicule to which this declaration of Addison's immediately exposed him. The most severe attack was made by John Dennis, who was a thorn in Addison's side on more than one occasion. Dennis' criticism was written in the same month in which Addison's essay appeared. It was contained in "A Letter to H. C. Esq. Of Simplicity in Poetical Composition, in Remarks on the 70th Spectator." This letter was afterward published in *Letters Familiar, Moral and Critical*, by John Dennis (London, 1721). Dennis asserts that Addi-

<sup>1</sup> *Treatise on the Sublime*, chap. viii, Twining's translation.

<sup>2</sup> Spingarn, *Lit. Crit. in the Renaissance*, p. 56.



son's purpose is "to see how far he can lead his reader by the nose." Proof of this design Dennis sees in Addison's "absurd and ridiculous" statement that the approval of the rabble of a nation is evidence of some peculiar aptness in the poem to please and gratify the mind of man. The idea of the mind of man, says Dennis, is obviously incompatible with the idea of the rabble. Addison's illustration of Molière's "old woman" is equally absurd, for poetry is intended to elevate human nature, and not to cater to such vulgar taste as that of a housekeeper. To make the approval of the rabble necessary is to insinuate that all those songs or ballads, which are the delight of the rabble, cannot fail to please all such readers as are not unqualified for the entertainment by their affectation or their ignorance; as if men of education in Great Britain were more ignorant than the rabble, or it required an extraordinary stock of knowledge to comprehend the excellence of old dogrel.

As to Addison's using Jonson and Sidney as his authorities in admiring the ballads, Dennis "very much doubts" if Ben ever said it; and if he did he meant it in jest; and Sidney means that he enjoyed the martial tune to which it was sung, not the words. Moreover, on the authority of Horace and Boileau, great poetry must use figurative language, and the diction must be exalted and sonorous. But the diction of "Chevy Chase" is lacking in figures and is vile and trivial. It is ridiculous to compare it with Virgil, for "this old dogrel is contemptible and Virgil is incomparable and inimitable." Finally, "the dogrel is utterly destitute both of figure and harmony, and consequently void of the great qualities which distinguish poetry and prose." Dennis adds, à propos of Addison's contention that "Chevy Chase" ought to please because it is natural,

There is a way of deviating from nature by bombast or tumour which soars above nature, and enlarges images beyond their real bulk; by affectation, which forsakes nature in quest of something unsuitable; and by imbecility, which degrades nature by faintness and diminution, by obscuring its appearances, and weakening its effects.

Dr. Johnson, in quoting this orphic utterance in his *Life of Addison*, adds,

In "Chevy Chase," there is not much of either bombast or affectation; but there is chill and lifeless imbecility. The story cannot possibly be told in a manner that shall make less impression upon the mind.

At about the same time as Dennis' attack appeared anonymously an unusually clever burlesque of Addison's essay. It is entitled *A Comment upon the History of Tom Thumb*, and is by Dr. William Wagstaff. It reached a second edition within the year of publication.

The *Comment* treats the subject in a mock-serious style, in which many of Addison's own phrases are used and his literary mannerisms cleverly parodied. The design of *Tom Thumb*

was undoubtedly to recommend virtue, and to show that however one may labour under the disadvantages of stature or deformity, or the meanness of parentage, yet if his mind and actions are above the ordinary level, those very disadvantages that seem to depress him, shall add a lustre to his character.

Tom's fall into a pudding-bowl is such an incident as "Virgil himself would have touched upon." The successive incidents of the story are provided with pretended parallels from the *Aeneid*. Addison's deprecatory manner is cleverly hit off in the remark,

And now, though I am very well satisfied with this performance, yet according to the usual modesty of us authors, I am obliged to tell the world, it will be a great satisfaction to me, knowing my own insufficiency, if I have given but some hints of the beauties of this poem, which are capable of being improved by those of greater learning and abilities.

Even the intellectual timorousness of Addison is made the subject of burlesque.

I hope nobody will be offended [writes Wagstaff] at my asserting things so positively, since 'tis the privilege of us commentators, who understand the meaning of an author seventeen hundred years after he wrote, much better than he could ever be supposed to do himself.

Nor indeed was the ridicule of Addison's essays on the ballads confined to his contemporaries. In the *Rambler* (No. 177), Dr. Johnson describes a certain Cantilenus who turned all his thoughts upon old ballads, for he considered them as the genuine records of the natural taste. He offered to show me a copy of "The Children in the Wood," which he firmly believed to be of the first edition, and by the help of which the text might be freed from several corruptions, if this age of barbarity had any claim to such favours from him.

The echoes of *Spectator* No. 85, and the satirical reproduction of Addison's slightly supercilious manner, make the reference unmistakable.

It will be seen that both Addison's choice of a ballad as a subject for serious discussion, and the nature of his treatment, were sufficiently alien to the spirit of his day to arouse both criticism and satire. Neither Dennis nor Wagstaff had any patience with such poetry; and Dennis especially could not understand how the approval of the mob could have any weight in validating poetry. It is interesting to see that Addison was frightened by the ridicule of his contemporaries, and in the revision of the *Spectator* for publication in volumes, modified many of his most enthusiastic phrases of commendation for the ballads. In the closing paragraph of *Spectator* No. 85, on the "Two Children in the Wood," he had paid his respects to "the little conceited Wits of the age, who can only show their judgment by finding fault"; but in his revision of the *Spectator*, he changed the statement, "The incidents grow out of the subject, and are such as Virgil himself would have touched upon,"<sup>1</sup> to "such as are the most proper to excite pity," and other phrases are correspondingly modified. Addison never seems to have had altogether the courage of his convictions.

But, with all the ridicule to which Addison's *penchant* for ballads exposed him, the effect of these essays of Addison's upon the steadily growing interest in ballads was very marked. It would, of course, be an exaggeration to say that this development would not have taken place without Addison's influence, for folk-poetry was slowly but surely coming to its own; but the early eighteenth-century lover of ballads had now the support of a serious and critical study of "Chevy Chase" by a distinguished author—and an author who had the further advantage of belonging in most respects to the prevailing school of literary opinion. Only two years after the appearance of the *Spectator* essay, Nicholas Rowe<sup>2</sup> declared his approval of the work of "Those venerable ancient song-inditers," in language which reads like a metrical summary of Addison's essay.

Their words no shuffling double-meaning knew,  
 Their speech was homely but their hearts were true.—  
 With rough majestic force they moved the heart,  
 And strength and nature made amends for art.

<sup>1</sup> Compare the burlesque just quoted from Wagstaff.

<sup>2</sup> Prologue to "Jane Shore," 1713.

More explicit evidence is that contained in the *Collection of Old Ballads*, published anonymously<sup>1</sup> in 1723, a collection which was so popular that it went to a second edition within three months after publication.

There are many [says the editor, in the Preface to Vol. II] who perhaps will think it ridiculous enough to enter seriously into a dissertation upon ballads; and therefore I shall say as little as possibly I can. . . . I cannot but observe here, that when the great Sir Philip Sidney commends the old song of "Chevy Chase," his commendation is in a much ruder style than the ballad itself; nor can we in this, and many more of our songs, find one piece of false, or as a modern author calls it, Gothic wit; no vile conceit, no low pun, or double entendre, but the whole is of a piece, apparelled in majestick simplicity, and the true poetical genius appears in every line.

The "modern author" referred to is Addison, and the "Gothic wit" and "majestick simplicity" is an echo of Addison's essay on the same ballad. Moreover, the "Wife of Bath" is included in the collection because "This great man (Addison) having occasion to give us some lines of Ovid, upon the same subject, has first quoted our song-enditer and then the Roman." In the note to "Chevy Chase," which is printed in the first volume of the *Old Ballads*, the editor says, "I shall not here point out the particular beauties of this song, with which even Mr. Addison was so charmed, that in a very accurate criticism upon it, . . . he proves that every line is written with a true spirit of poetry." In the Preface to Vol. III, after remarking that "Mr. Addison's criticism upon Chevy Chase is so full that it would be impertinent to add anything," he argues that the author of "Chevy Chase" not only *might* have been familiar with Virgil (as Addison had contended) but that he *must* have been familiar with Virgil, in order to produce so good a poem in the epic manner.

Equally indicative of the encouragement which the "Chevy Chase" essays gave to the lovers of popular poetry, is Allan Ramsay's remark in the Preface to *The Evergreen*.

I have observed [says he] that readers of the best and most exquisite discernment frequently complain of our modern writings, as filled with affected delicacies and studied refinements, which they would gladly exchange for that natural strength of thought and simplicity of style our forefathers practiced.

<sup>1</sup> Generally attributed, without adequate evidence, to Ambrose Philips.

And finally, when Bishop Percy was about to give the *Reliques* to a world whose attitude toward folk-poetry was still a matter of uncertainty, he felt constrained to invoke the authority of Addison to justify a serious consideration of the ballad.

In a polished age like the present [he writes in the Preface to the *Reliques*] I am sensible that many of these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them. Yet have they, for the most part, a pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which, in the opinion of no mean critics, have been thought to compensate for the want of higher beauties.

Percy's footnote identifies the "critics" as Addison, and—on the authority of *Spectator* No. 70—"Mr. Dryden and the witty Lord Dorset." In the collection itself, the old ballad of "Chevy Chase," which occupies the first place, is prefaced by an acknowledgment to Addison, and a justification, in Percy's usual manner, to the effect that "those genuine strokes of nature and artless passion, which have endeared it to the most simple readers, have recommended it to the most refined." The modern version of the ballad is printed with a similar acknowledgment; the "Children in the Wood" is introduced with the statement that it "has been set in so favourable a light by the *Spectator* No. 85"; and even "The Wanton Wife of Bath" is warranted by the fact that "Mr. Addison has pronounced this an excellent old ballad."

In the light of such comments as these, it is certainly not exaggerating to claim for Addison a place of considerable importance in the evolution of interest in the ballad and in folk-poetry generally. He stands among the pioneers in this evolution; and in so doing, must be regarded in any study of the development of Romanticism in the eighteenth century.

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